"Nothing Puzzles God: Optimism, Absurdity, and the Illusion of Peace in Chinua Achebe's 'Civil Peace'"

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's short story "Civil Peace," published in 1971, tells the story of Jonathan Iwegbu, a Nigerian man who survives the devastating Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) and attempts to rebuild his life in the aftermath. Despite losing one of his four children and nearly all his possessions, Jonathan remains remarkably optimistic, repeatedly declaring that "nothing puzzles God." This paper argues that Achebe uses Jonathan's unwavering optimism not as a simple celebration of resilience, but as a complex literary device to expose the deep ironies and ongoing injustices of post-war Nigeria. Through the story's ironic title, its depiction of a failed social system, and its philosophical engagement with absurdity, Achebe challenges readers to question whether true peace can exist when the conditions that enabled war greed, violence, and social breakdown remain unchanged. Jonathan's survival depends

not on the restoration of civil order but on his personal resourcefulness, his willingness to accept loss, and his almost absurd faith in a higher plan. By examining the story's use of irony, symbolism, and philosophical depth, this paper demonstrates that "Civil Peace" offers a profound meditation on the nature of peace, the human capacity for hope, and the fragile line between resilience and delusion in the face of overwhelming hardship.

Introduction

Chinua Achebe is one of Africa's most celebrated writers, best known for his novel *Things Fall Apart*, which tells the story of colonial destruction in Nigeria. However, Achebe also wrote powerful short stories that explore the challenges facing Nigeria after independence. "Civil Peace," first published in 1971, is one of his most famous short stories. It is set in the aftermath of the Nigerian Civil War (also known as the Biafran War), which lasted from 1967 to 1970 and caused immense suffering, with over one million people dying from starvation and violence. The story follows Jonathan Iwegbu, a man who has survived the war and now tries to rebuild his life with his wife Maria and three of their four children. Jonathan is remarkably optimistic. He counts himself lucky to have survived, to still have his bicycle, and to find his house still standing. He repeats the phrase "nothing puzzles God" as a way of accepting both good fortune and tragedy. However, this optimism exists in a world that remains deeply broken. The story's title, "Civil Peace," is deeply ironic. The peace that follows the war is not truly civil or peaceful. Instead, it is a time when former soldiers become thieves, when the police are powerless, and when ordinary people must fend for themselves. This paper argues that Achebe uses Jonathan's optimism not to celebrate simple hope, but to expose the deep ironies and continuing violence of post-war Nigeria. Through irony, symbolism, and philosophical exploration, Achebe shows that true peace requires more than the absence of war it requires justice, security, and social order, all of which remain absent in Jonathan's world.

The Ironic Title: What "Civil Peace" Really Means

The title of Achebe's story is its first and most important irony. The word "civil" usually describes something polite, orderly, and peaceful. However, "civil" is also the word used in "civil war" a war between people of the same country. By calling the story "Civil Peace," Achebe forces readers to think about how closely war and peace are connected. As one scholar explains, the story "wryly suggests that civil peace is the mirror image of civil war, insofar as the human tendencies that push people to war are not completely resolved in its wake, regardless of political settlements" (Lynn 130). In other words, the same greed, violence, and selfishness that caused the war do not simply disappear when the fighting stops. They continue to shape daily life. The thieves who rob Jonathan at the end of the story make this point directly. When they surround his house, the leader tells Jonathan that no one needs to get hurt because the war is over and this is now the "civil peace" (Achebe 87). The thieves use the phrase to justify their crime. They are saying that in this new "civil peace," everyone must look out for themselves. The government cannot protect anyone. The police do not respond. Neighbors do not help. The "civil peace" is actually a state of lawlessness where the strong take from the weak. Jonathan survives not because the system protects him, but because he accepts this reality and moves on. This irony is central to Achebe's message: peace is not simply the end of war. True peace requires justice, security, and a functioning society. Without these things, "peace" is just another name for chaos.

The Bicycle: A Symbol of Survival and Hope

One of the most important symbols in "Civil Peace" is Jonathan's bicycle. During the war, a soldier tried to take the bicycle from Jonathan, claiming it was needed for military use. Jonathan was suspicious of the soldier and bribed him with money instead. He then buried the bicycle next to a graveyard to hide it. After the war, he dug it up and was delighted to find it still worked (Achebe 83). The bicycle represents several things. First, it represents survival. Jonathan saved the bicycle through his intelligence and resourcefulness. He did not fight the soldier directly, but he found a way to keep what was his. Second, the bicycle represents hope and movement toward the future. Jonathan uses it as a taxi to earn money and support his family. It is his tool for rebuilding his life. Third, the bicycle represents the value of small things. Jonathan admits that the bicycle is not as important as his family's lives, but it is still precious to him. In a world where so much has been destroyed, even a bicycle becomes a symbol of possibility. However, the bicycle also has a darker meaning. Jonathan had to bury

it next to a graveyard, next to where his youngest son and other dead were buried. This reminds us that Jonathan's survival came at a terrible cost. He lost a child. The bicycle is a symbol of hope, but it is hope that exists alongside grief. Jonathan's optimism does not erase his loss; it simply allows him to keep going despite it.

Optimism as Resistance: Jonathan and the Absurd

Jonathan's optimism is the most striking feature of his character. He begins the story by declaring that he is "unbelievably lucky" to have survived the war with his wife and three of his four children (Achebe 82). He repeats the phrase "nothing puzzles God" whenever something good or bad happens (Achebe 82). Some readers might see Jonathan as naive or in denial. How can he be so happy when he has lost a child and nearly everything he owned? However, many scholars argue that Jonathan's optimism is not denial but a form of resistance. One study describes Jonathan as acting "like the mythological figure Sisyphus," who was condemned to roll a boulder up a hill forever, only to watch it roll back down each time (Zhiqing 3). Like Sisyphus, Jonathan faces an absurd situation. The world around him is chaotic and unfair. The government cannot protect him. The police do not help. Thieves can take his money with no consequences. In such a world, why bother trying? Yet Jonathan does try. He works hard. He repairs his house. He runs a small business. He does not give up. His optimism is not about pretending that everything is fine. It is about choosing to keep going despite the absurdity of his situation. As one analysis explains, Jonathan is "always ready to challenge with serenity and resolution any absurd situation in his life" (Zhiqing 4). His repeated phrase, "nothing puzzles God," is not a statement that everything makes sense. It is an acceptance that not everything has to make sense. Jonathan trusts that there is a bigger plan, even if he cannot see it. This faith allows him to survive. It is not weakness; it is strength.

The Failure of Community and Government

One of the most disturbing aspects of "Civil Peace" is the complete failure of both the community and the government to protect Jonathan and his family. When the thieves surround Jonathan's house, he and his family cry out for help. They shout to their neighbors and to the police. But no one comes. The thieves mock them, imitating their calls for help to show that they are alone (Achebe 87). This scene reveals the breakdown of social order in post-war Nigeria. During the war, people may have helped each other survive. But in the "civil peace," everyone is focused on their own survival. Neighbors do not want to risk their

own safety to help someone else. The police are either powerless or corrupt. As one analysis notes, Achebe "reveals the failure to reestablish a viable judicial and police system. The result is the rise of criminal acts among civilians and military personnel alike" ("Civil Peace" Wikipedia). In this environment, Jonathan cannot rely on anyone but himself. He does not fight the thieves or try to reason with them. He gives them the money they demand and moves on. This is not cowardice; it is practicality. Jonathan understands that in a world without justice, resistance is pointless. The next morning, his neighbors come to offer their condolences, but Jonathan and his family are already back to work. Jonathan tells them that he was not reliant on the stolen money. He repeats his favorite proverb: "Nothing puzzles God" (Achebe 88). This response is both inspiring and troubling. It is inspiring because Jonathan refuses to be defeated. But it is troubling because it shows how little he expects from his community. He does not ask for help or demand justice. He simply accepts the loss and continues. This acceptance is necessary for survival, but it also reveals how broken the society has become.

Conclusion

"Civil Peace" is a deceptively simple story that offers a profound meditation on the nature of peace, survival, and hope. Through the ironic title, the symbolism of the bicycle, and the character of Jonathan Iwegbu, Chinua Achebe shows that the end of war does not automatically bring true peace. The same forces that caused the war greed, violence, and social breakdown continue to shape life in post-war Nigeria. Jonathan survives not because the system protects him, but because of his own resourcefulness and his almost absurd faith in a higher plan. His repeated phrase, "nothing puzzles God," is both a comfort and a critique. It comforts him in the face of tragedy, but it also exposes the failure of human institutions to provide justice and security. Achebe does not offer easy answers. He does not tell us whether Jonathan's optimism is admirable or delusional. Instead, he asks us to consider what true peace requires. It requires more than the absence of war. It requires justice, security, and a functioning society. Without these things, "civil peace" is just another name for chaos. Jonathan's story reminds us that hope is powerful, but hope alone cannot rebuild a broken world. True peace must be built by people working together, by communities that protect each other, and by governments that serve their citizens. Until then, the "civil peace" remains an illusion and survival depends on the kind of stubborn, absurd hope that Jonathan Iwegbu embodies.

Works Cited

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